

Wiener-Dog: Todd Solondz continues to look critically at American life

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Written and directed by Todd Solondz

Wiener-Dog is the latest film from American director Todd Solondz. This is the seventh feature, excluding one early film, that Solondz (born 1959) has directed since 1995. He has concentrated on depicting middle-class American life.

In the face of increasing social chaos and, in the past 15 years, the endless “war on terror,” his characters have often both insisted on maintaining the pretense of suburban normality and inflicted punishment, for the most part unwittingly, on those who deviated from conventional behavior. The occasionally extreme forms of the deviations (pedophilia, child molestation, rape, suicide, etc.) seem related proportionately to the feverish efforts to police normalcy.

At his best, Solondz demonstrates unusual clear-sightedness and compassion. In 1996, writing about his *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, which centered on the mostly unfortunate Dawn Wiener (Heather Matarazzo) navigating pre-adolescence in the suburbs of New Jersey, we noted that “The film’s strengths include its steady, unsentimental gaze, its obvious concern for the fate of its characters, its critical treatment of a variety of institutions.” He has also demonstrated a sharp satirical talent, often directed against the self-absorption and self-involvement of certain social types. Ally Sheedy’s supremely narcissistic Hollywood screenwriter in *Life During Wartime* (2009) is only the most devastating example.

At their weakest, his films descend into mockery and condescension toward his often hapless characters and needlessly sensationalize their taboo activities. In 2002, we asked how it was “possible that an artist of some intelligence and sensitivity should be so inconsistent in his attitude toward his own creations and beyond them, his fellow creatures.” The ultimate answer lies in the

political stagnation and the various pressures the difficult social and cultural climate has exerted on the filmmaker. He alternately rushes to the side of his characters or leaves them cruelly to their fate.

The new film comprises four stories, loosely linked by the presence of a “wiener-dog” (dachshund). Each has at least one or more satirical, telling moments or elements. The most forceful and welcome derision, contained in the final two sections, is reserved for New York City’s art and academic world.

In the first part of *Wiener-Dog*, Danny (Tracy Letts), a wealthy suburbanite, brings home a female dachshund as a present for his cancer-survivor son, Remy (Keaton Nigel Cooke), much to the chagrin of his wife, Dina (Julie Delpy). Remy, we presume, has not had an easy time of it, both on account of his illness and his severe, hard-to-please parents.

Anger is Danny’s customary emotional state (“Heel, motherf---r!,” he vainly commands the small dog). When Dina is not putting a happy face on things (for an animal, she tells Remy, getting spayed is “like going to the dentist”), she is lying to her son and trying to terrorize him (at one point she obviously makes up a story about a pet dog she had as a child in France who was “raped” by a stray named “Mohammed”!).

A great deal is summed up by the sight of Danny and Dina, with rolled up yoga mats under their arms, jumping into their Mercedes convertible and roaring off to class. “They’re gone,” yelps Remy, and he and the dog have a grand time. The unfortunate consequences lead the parents to hand the animal over to the veterinarian for euthanasia. Remy asks his mother, “What is it like to be put to sleep?” She replies, typically, “It’s good ... it’s forgetting about everything.”

An employee at the vet’s, Dawn Wiener (this time

around played by Greta Gerwig), however, intervenes and takes the dog home with her. Dawn is obviously very much alone and desperate for company. At a convenience store, she runs into her old nemesis from *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, Brandon McCarthy (now Kieran Culkin), who looks more than a little worse for wear.

After a few moments of nervous, awkward conversation, Brandon asks Dawn whether she would like to accompany him to Ohio. “What’s in Ohio?” she asks. “Crystal meth,” Brandon replies. It’s only a joke, he adds quickly, although we strongly suspect it is not. In any case, Dawn agrees to accompany him.

On their trip, in a beat-up van, we see signs of the American malaise, which includes Brandon’s own serious drug-taking. At one point, they pick up three despondent-looking Mexican musicians. Dawn cheerfully—and expectantly—asks them, “Do you like it here in America?” “No,” comes the answer. “We prefer Mexico. ... America is so lonely and depressed.” They go on to suggest that the US is like a “big, fat elephant” drowning in despair.

In the third part of *Wiener-Dog*, the animal now belongs to Dave Schmerz (Danny DeVito), a screenwriter with only one major movie to his credit, who teaches a university film course. Certain students and faculty members are complaining about his “negativity,” Schmerz learns. He is also dealing with agents and studios, futilely trying to get his second screenplay into production. He already bitterly regrets the compromises he made on his first one (“I wanted it to be funny ... I wanted people to like it ... I wanted it to sell.”)

Schmerz undergoes humiliation after humiliation, including the public insults of an arrogant, self-centered former student turned successful young hot-shot director. Schmerz’s students either know nothing about film and film history or have absorbed fashionable ideologies. In fact, one student, in a lovely scene, tells his professor that he wants to write a script about “identity,” no less. He has studied “queer theory” and the “epistemology of the closet.” His friends tell him his script is “transgressive,” while Schmerz is nothing but a “dinosaur.” The latter takes extreme action.

In the final portion, Ellen Burstyn plays an ill, elderly woman, Nana, waiting for her granddaughter, whom she hasn’t seen in four years, to pay a call. The same

dachshund, now charmingly named “Cancer,” has somehow fallen into the old woman’s hands. Zoe (Zosia Mamet), when she finally arrives, is accompanied by her horrible black boyfriend, Fantasy (Michael Shaw), a well-known artist, who specializes in turning out stuffed, roboticized animals. But, Zoe hastens to point out, his work is not in any sense derivative of Damien Hirst’s. Fantasy storms out in a huff at the mere mention of that name. The girl has only come to ask her grandmother for money for one of her boyfriend’s projects. In any case, the dog comes to a sad end.

As noted, the hostility directed toward the contemporary art and film scene is perhaps the strongest feature of *Wiener-Dog*. It is especially promising to see the pretensions and essential foulness of identity politics held up to ridicule. Not everyone is fooled or dominated by these reactionary trends.

Gerwig is not entirely convincing as the distressed, apparently loveless Dawn Wiener, but Culkin is appropriately troubling as the grown-up Brandon McCarthy. He has the demeanor of someone beaten down, suppressed by the prevailing conditions. One senses that Brandon, and there are many like him in the US, has fought a battle with the economic facts of life in America and been decisively, irreversibly defeated. Not unattractive, not unappealing, he has by now simply reduced his existence to the tracking down of substances that will temporarily alleviate the pain and distress.

Dogs, as a rule, are less interesting than people and it’s just as well that the “wiener-dog” plays less and less of a role as the film progresses. Solondz speaks of dogs as “a kind of vessel for people’s emotions and illusions and yearnings and desires and so forth. In fact, they can be a kind of projection for a purity or innocence that’s always unreachable for us as humans.” Perhaps, but this does not seem to have much to do with the most interesting elements of his film, which are bound up with a concrete examination and criticism of American life.



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